Kelly Rogalski

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The Baltimore Riots: Does the Media Influence America’s Opinions?

Being that nothing is ever simply black and white, many times a bias view can find its way into media reporting. Today, there are several media outlets that people in America have access to: the news on TV, newspapers, social media, and online sources. Most people have access to at least one of these sources; the media and its outlets are supposed to be providing people with facts about what is occurring in other parts of the country and world. How the media portrays those events, however, is critical in how people watching understand those events, and how or why they happened. If a certain news station, for example, only shows a negative side of an event, it can lead to a misunderstanding for the people watching.

Freddie Gray was a 25 year old black man who was severely injured while in custody of the Baltimore Police. The injuries he sustained resulted in his death a few days later. In an article by BBC News, it states that

State prosecutor Marilyn Mosby has said that Gray was illegally arrested, assaulted and falsely accused of carrying an illegal switchblade…Ms Mosby said that it was actually a legal knife and therefore did not justify arrest. Police Commissioner Anthony Batts has also stated that it is not clear why Gray was stopped by the officers as there ‘is no law against running’ (BBC News, par. 4, 6-7).

Freddie Grey was eventually detained by the officers and put into a police van. It has been said that he requested medical attention and his inhaler several times; however, all requests were denied. While in the van, Gray received multiple injuries. Eventually Gray was transported to the hospital. The same BBC News article states that

Gray's ‘spine was 80% severed at his neck’. When the injury was sustained is not clear. ABC News has reported that an injury on his head matched a bolt in the back of the police van…The paper reported on Tuesday that [‘significant force’](http://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-gray-injuries-20150420-story.html) would be required to inflict those injuries. It said, citing medical experts, that the force would be similar to that of ‘the impact from a car accident’ (BBC News, par. 22-23, 27).

While Gray is not the only person to have died while in police custody, many people believe that his death could have been prevented. Criminal charges were placed on six officers that were involved; however, the peaceful demonstrations eventually turned to riots.

The Baltimore Riots occurred in Baltimore, Maryland in April 2015, and were similar to the happenings of Ferguson, Missouri. “Baltimore has faced repeated protests over [the case of 25-year-old Freddie Gray](http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/22/us/baltimore-freddie-gray-what-we-know/index.html), who died while in police custody” (Levs, par. 6). While there were many peaceful protests, real media coverage began to develop once the riots began. This leads to the question, is it plausible that the media only covered the violence in Baltimore? The media essentially chooses what it wants to portray. Writers choose what to write down, the news stations choose what footage to televise and report on, which in turn leads to what people in and outside of Baltimore see and read about. It is not very often that riots erupt out of nowhere, there is typically a reason behind them. Many times those reasons revolve around not being heard, or feeling pushed to the side. It’s important to understand that what America see’s in the media of situations such as the Baltimore Riots can have an affect on how they see certain people, or on their opinions. The media has a strong voice in America and how they portray events should be based strictly on fact without any bias.

BACKGROUND AND SECONDARY RESEARCH

Based on an article in The Washington Post, “Coverage on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News increased substantially on April 27, the night violence erupted in Baltimore. The following day, coverage on cable news peaked at 59 stories. During these two days of violent incidents, coverage increased by a substantial 162 percent, compared with the two days prior, April 25 and 26, when the protests were peaceful” (Williams, par. 5). These numbers help to show how media coverage increases and many times becomes the main stories on news networks as soon as something turns violent, rather than focusing on the peaceful protests.

During the Baltimore Riots, affiliated gang members of rival gangs came together in support of the protests. CNN painted a very different picture than one of the gang members banding together in simple support that something was not right in the city; “The police ‘came out with this threat yesterday that some of the local gangs were banding together and going to attack police.’” (Levs, par. 10). On the CNN report, there was no opposition statement from the other side: from the so-called “thugs” and gang members who supposedly banded together in an attempt to harm police officers. AtlantaBlackStar.com proves something other than what was stated by CNN.

Meanwhile, reports that local gang members reached a truce solely in the name of killing cops are being denounced by gang members. While a truce has been made, they explained that the call for peace is in the name of Freddie Gray and not in the name of harming officers. ‘We want the people of Baltimore City to know that the image they are trying to portray of gangs in Baltimore – the [Black Guerilla Family], the Bloods, the Crips – we did not make that truce to harm cops,’ a man who identified as a member of the Bloods gang told Baltimore’s NBC affiliate WBAL 11 (Gordon, par. 37-39).

Many times, when stories are developing so quickly, it can be difficult for reporters to get information from both sides. Although this may be true, it is ultimately up too the media outlet to decide what information they give to the public and how they go about doing so.

The words used by certain media outlets can also lead to a bias in both the outlets and a bias for the American people. Words have different meanings and connotations for everyone. There may be several definitions for a word. Words can mean different things in different cultures. Many times, media outlets use words that represent an entire race or culture in a negative way. CNN reported, “Former New York Police Detective Harry Houck disagreed. ‘There’s no thin line here,’ he said. ‘There’s breaking the law…and then there’s peacefully demonstrating,’ Once authorities start allowing people to break the law, “thugs” will keep coming out, he said” (Levs, par. 22). In this statement, “thugs” are associated with those that cause trouble and destroy a city. The comment by the former New York Police Detective came about against a comment made by a CNN commentator:

‘It's a very, very tricky tightrope to walk,’ he said. "We saw in Ferguson the exact opposite, right? Where they told police to come out, police were in full force. In fact we saw maybe one of the strongest shows of force in such a small town in recent memory, and it didn't do anything but further militarize the space, further antagonize a community and create the very thing they were trying to prevent (Levs, par. 21).

The use of the word “thugs” is one that may have strong connotations for some people and it may be perceived in different ways by different people; thus possibly creating a bias. Using the word “thug” is seemingly stereotyping everyone that came to demonstrate in Baltimore.

When there is news of something chaotic happening, the public wants to hear whatever news they can, immediately. It may lead to speculation, or even false information. The most newsworthy stories seem to be the ones that revolve around the most destruction. “The broadcasting of protesters attacking police or setting cars on fire is not only newsworthy, but also shapes a media narrative suggesting that the situation on the ground is predominantly violent and criminal rather than a complex site with peaceful protests and even rival gangs searching for answers” (Wang, par. 6). It is most often in the media that we see the negative and destructive versions of situations. This article explains how the portrayal of the Baltimore Riots failed to include the societal context in which it was happening. The focus that was put on the Baltimore Riots could quickly be associated as simply just another violent riot. An article by the Daily Dot explains that the media’s outlook on the Baltimore Riots stemmed from the violent actions, rather than the peaceful ones.

Instead of looking at the work the community is doing to strengthen itself, they quickly focus on criminalizing protesters, illustrating an idea of a black rage that deserves such aggressive treatment from law enforcement…Very little attention was paid to the peaceful protests that started after Gray’s death on the 19th, and today Baltimore is overrun with journalists looking to cover another Ferguson, where police fire tear gas canisters and pepper spray at protesters, while buildings are burning (Garcia, par. 7-8).

The ways in which the media goes about explaining and broadcasting breaking news stories is imperative. It’s important to release important information, while remaining neutral and without creating any possible bias opinions.

An article in *American Journalism Review* covered the ways in which the media focused on the Baltimore Riots. “President Obama was among those who questioned the intense media focus on destruction of property instead of the peaceful protests and other events that led up to the violence” (Eichensehr, par. 2). Different coverage ranged from hometown to national. While hometown coverage seemed to be intense and wide ranging, national coverage led to more controversy.

Tabloids such as the Chicago Sun-Times and the New York Daily News favored fiery images of angry protesters attacking police vehicles, looting and burning buildings, while larger broadsheet papers including the New York Times and Seattle Times printed images of police in riot gear and tense moments between law enforcement and demonstrators (Eichensehr, par. 12).

The ways in which the media covers stories is important in how the public understands them, and create their own opinion’s. People may be influenced by the media in how the perceive different situations.

PRIMARY RESEARCH, METHODS AND FINDINGS

To conduct my research, I created a short survey about different media outlets and the Baltimore Riots. I wanted to find out the types of media people most looked toward for breaking new stories, if they felt any news outlets were biased, whether or not they felt that the media gave them enough understanding of the Baltimore Riots, and if they felt that how some media portrays stories leads to increased racial tensions in America. Being that social media is more popular today than it ever has been in the past, approximately 53% of people answered that they look towards social media for breaking news stories. 92% of people heard of the Baltimore Riots, with most of what they knew of it coming from a news outlet. While 46% think that Fox News is the most credible news outlet, 38.5% think that both Fox News and CNN are biased on the stories they report, which I think is interesting. 46% of people said that they believe that they were not given enough information about the Baltimore Riots from the media outlet that they paid attention to. Another 46% of people answered “no” to the question, “Do you think the media uses its standing to create racial tensions in America?”, while 30.8% answered “yes”. 53.8% said that they thought the news only reported on the violent and negative aspects of the Baltimore Riots. 69.2% answered “somewhat justified” to the question, “Do you feel the rioters were justified in why they were rioting?” I believe the most interesting part of my survey findings is in regard to the last two questions: “In your opinion, does rioting or peaceful protesting make more of an impact for recognition of a problem?” and “Do you remember hearing about the peaceful protests prior to the Baltimore Riots?” For the first question, 69.2% said that peaceful protesting makes more of an impact in gaining recognition for a problem, while another 69.2% said “no” when asked about whether or not they remember hearing about the peaceful protests that were happening prior to the Baltimore Riots.

Figure 1 depicts the percentage of people who heard about the peaceful protests that were occurring in Baltimore prior to the outbreak of the Baltimore Riots. Despite the belief of the majority of the survey takers that peaceful protesting makes more of an impact for recognition of a problem, it’s important to note that they did not hear much of those peaceful protests. 69.2% of the survey takers did not hear of the peaceful protests prior to hearing about the Baltimore Riots.

Figure 1

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

It is not a question of whether reporters are bad people; it is a question of whether or not how media outlets report stories and what they choose to show creates a bias for the network and for the American people. An article by Huffington Post explained what is not working in the media’s coverage of Baltimore.

But cable news has been flooded with graphic and disturbing images of burning cars, torched buildings and violent clashes between police and protesters. Newspaper front pages show only the destruction. Twitter is dominated by extreme photos and news anchors are playing the blame game rather than focusing on solutions. Images of the peaceful protests or community members coming together are scarce. Like much of the coverage in Ferguson, the media has resorted to repeating only the negative while doing very little to move the story forward (Taibi, par. 3, 4).

While it is important to note that during tough situations such as in the one in Baltimore, the American public likes to have as much information as soon as possible. It may be easier for news stations and different media outlets to simply show the violent side of things, rather than trying to dig deeper as to why chaos is ensuing.

While 46.2% of the survey takers did not feel that the media uses its standing to increase racial tensions in America, another article see’s it differently. In an article by *The Root,* it states that “Media bias not only negatively impacts black America’s relationship with [law enforcement and the judicial system](http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_Race_and_Punishment.pdf) but also extends to how African Americans are perceived in society at large” (Savali, par. 8). The way the media portrays its stories has the possibility of creating a negative bias for those being reported on. From an article titled *Racial Bias, Unspoken but Heard*, it says that “the nonverbal displays of white characters toward blacks on television have a deep influence on the whites’ attitudes toward, and associations with, blacks” (Dovidio, p. 1642). This statement has the ability to show that people are influenced by what they see on TV and read online or in newspapers; by hearing about the Baltimore Riots, especially the violent and negative aspects, it can lead to a bias realistically toward African American people. The fact that many news outlets chose not to portray or talk about the peaceful protests that were going on in remembrance of Freddie Gray’s death, people may only associate negative aspects with the Baltimore Riots.

There was an interesting tweet printed in an article of *The Daily Dot*.

As the *Atlantic’s* Ta-Nehisi Coates tweeted, ‘[Rioting] is an expression of anger. Some humans riot because their school lost the big game. Other because the State can’t stop killing them’ Yet only the latter of those riots are painted as a portrait of criminality. The former is more often treated as a moment when boys will be boys; no tear gas, no riot gear, no tanks or snipers. We witness this double standard repeatedly (Garcia, par. 9-10).

There does seem to be more emphasis in the media on the occurrences that involve people fighting against police for what they feel was negligent on the police’s part, than an uproar for a lost football game. While showing the public what is going on during a riot is important for safety and informational purposes, it is also important to provide the public with as much information about that riot as possible, in order to give people a good understanding of why others may be rioting. By allowing statements to be used in the media using words such as “thugs”, and typically only showing pictures and videos of stand-offs between police and demonstrators can inadvertently create bias for the public watching. “the history of minorities in media suggests that the use of negative stereotypes tends to dominate the portrayal of those groups” (Gandy, p. 602). The public needs to be as informed as possible, and it is the media’s job to deliver that information in a neutral way.

It is ultimately up to each individual to create their own opinions; however, the media is the major window into other parts of the country. Because of this, most of what the public knows of different situations typically comes from the media. If the media only portrays negative and violent aspects of things such as the Baltimore Riots, it can lead to unfavorable stereotypes without having enough knowledge of the situation.

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